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Mundane materiality and agential cuts: A Baradian reading of disabled people's identity formation

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Abstract

This paper proposes that the role of materiality in research on identity formation has been marginalized. We bring materiality to the fore of identity formation, through a posthumanist performative (Barad, 2007) reading of the way in which 'agential cuts' - specific material-discursive practices which determine particular boundaries and properties of 'entities', including of one's identities - are made within and through material and human intra-actions. Through analysis of interview texts of a disabled academic's everyday work experiences that refer to mundane material artefacts and practices such as box files, chairs, and standing in meetings, we intend to "critically reflect on ... the seemingly insignificant and all-too-mundane ... realities of everyday organizational life" (Ybema et al., 2015) for disabled people, to explore "the boundary-making practices that distinguish 'disabled and 'non-disabled' people.

Key words: mundane materiality, agential cuts, identity, identity formation, posthumanist, disabled people

Mundane materiality and agential cuts: A Baradian reading of disabled people's identity formation

Introduction

Whilst individuals' identity formation, particularly when conceptualised as 'identity work', tends to be conceptualized as 'identity talk' (Bardon et al., 2012), focus on the discursive performance of identity does not imply that identity formation processes involve only talk (Ybema et al., 2009). However, the role of materiality has been marginalized (Bardon et al., 2012) and relatively neglected (Symon & Pritchard, 2014) and, therefore, remains under-developed. In relation to the so-called linguistic turn in social sciences more generally, Barad (2003: 801) claims that, whilst language and discourse are important, "There is an important sense in which the only thing that does not seem to matter anymore is matter". Bardon et al. (2012:361) therefore advocate identity research consider not only how identity "is both the cause and consequence of language but also of material arrangements".

Such poststructuralist-perspective identity research tends to draw on a Foucauldian understanding of discourse to analyze how individuals accommodate or resist the regulatory effects of societal and organizational discourses and practices in constructing particular identities (see, for example, Brown & Lewis, 2011; Holmqvist et al., 2013). For instance, Holmqvist et al. (2013) explore how a specialized work program constructed individuals as 'occupationally disabled'. Concern for how disabled people are "constructed as negatively different" (Chouinard, 1999:143), for instance, through the constituting effects of ableism (the normative assumptions of non-disability as an organizing principle) is accepted within the disability studies literature and is gaining traction in Organization and Management Studies (OMS) (e.g. Williams & Mavin, 2012; Holmqvist et al., 2013).

To some extent, Symon and Pritchard's (2011: 2) research, which brought together ideas on identity and sociomateriality, through the concept of 'sociomaterial identity', connects with our interest in bringing materiality to the fore in understanding identity formation. Symon and Pritchard (2011: 8) conceptualize identity as a "complex sociomaterial entanglement of role, person, artefacts, place and time, the elements of which are constructed and interweaved as an ongoing identity project". Like Bardon et al. (2012), Symon and Pritchard (2011) suggest drawing together identity work, sociomateriality and a performative understanding to develop this research agenda. We address such calls by drawing on Barad's (2007) concepts, explicated as part of her "posthumanist performative account of material-discursive practices" (p. 146), and particularly her notion of agential cuts which are specific material-discursive intra-actions through which particular boundaries and properties of 'entities', including of one's identities, are produced and become meaningful. We synthesize a poststructuralist perspective on power as "intrinsic to discursive constructions of routine processes of organizing" (Brown and Lewis, 2011:871) with a posthumanist understanding of performativity (Barad, 2003, 2007) that recognizes matter as active in producing the world (Barad, 2003) and, hence, in shaping identity formation. By drawing on data relating to disabled academics' experiences of local organizing practices, our aim is to fuse interest in the discursive effects of ableism in OMS with the emergent work on Baradian-informed understandings of sociomaterial identity work (Symon & Pritchard, 2014) to consider the power effects of discourse

and materiality, and particularly mundane materiality such as box files, chairs and office space, through a sociomaterial reading of disabled people's identity formation.

We begin the paper by considering key concepts from Barad's work which informs our understanding of identity formation. We show how Barad's notion of agential cuts which are produced in particular discursive-material arrangements, or apparatuses, connects with Bardon et al's (2012) call for future research to explore "the 'socio-material actualization' of identity regulation apparatuses". In practice this means taking into account particularly how "material actualization" is produced through "technologies, spatial arrangements, processes, routines and any other material artifacts" (Bardon et al, 2012: 356). We next confirm our research aim and questions and then provide an overview of the wider study, of disabled academics experiences of career (Williams, 2010), from which the data in this paper are taken. As part of our discussion of the research design, we elaborate the analytical framework we have developed to make Baradian-informed readings for the identity effects of discursive-material apparatuses within which particular agential cuts are enacted. From our readings of the data extracts of one disabled academic's experiences, we offer insights into how identity-boundary differences are materialized and discuss how the effects of these differences matter. We end the paper with preliminary thoughts on the implications of our research.

Key concepts underpinning Barad's (2007) posthumanist performative account of material-discursive practices

The concept of intra-action is central to Barad's (2007) posthumanist performative account, and is the starting point also for our conceptual framework. Barad (2007:376) argues that "the world is an ongoing intra-active engagement, and bodies are among the differential performances of the world's dynamic intra-activity, in an endless reconfiguring of boundaries and properties". The notion of the differential performances of bodies as part of ongoing intra-action, and the focus of performativity on "practices, doings, and actions" (Barad, 2007: 135), aligns well with the idea of identity as performative, in both discursive and bodily meanings. As Kenny, Whittle and Willmott (2011) suggest, identity is signalled through the body, and the power structures which shape identity are reproduced through bodily work. In other words, as Pullen (2007: 327) notes, "*bodies matter* but bodies are different" (italics in original). Poststructuralist-perspective identity research tends to draw on a Foucauldian understanding of discourse to analyze how individuals accommodate or resist the power and regulatory effects of societal and organizational discourses and practices in constructing particular identities (see, for example, Brown & Lewis, 2011; Holmqvist et al., 2013). For Barad (2007), reading Fernandes' (1997) identity-based research through her posthumanist performative account of material-discursive practices, the intra-actions of humans and materiality iteratively produce power relations, for example of class, caste, and gender, through which identities are mutually constituted (Barad, 2007). In other words, identity formation is an ongoing, contingent and contested material process, produced through iterative (re)configuring of relations of power (Barad, 2007).

Particular meanings, boundaries and bodies, as instruments of power, are produced through "material-discursive apparatuses" (Barad, 2007). Therefore, as Barad (2007) explains, "the articulation of a given apparatus is always already a boundary-

making practice” which contributes in varying ways to “processes of materialization” (p. 449). Bardon et al (2012) explain the differential effect of different apparatuses. Like Barad (2007), Bardon et al (2012) draw on a Foucauldian understanding of apparatus, in their discussion of identity regulation, where ‘apparatus’ is understood as a “thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures and scientific statements, philosophical, moral, and philanthropic propositions” (Foucault, 1977: 299, cited by Bardon et al, 2012: 355).

Bardon et al (2012: 356) suggest further work is needed to explore in practice the material actualization of identity regulating apparatuses by taking into account “technologies, spatial arrangements, processes, routines and any other material artifacts” (p. 356) and the individual’s position within the social environment, which they describe as the ‘positional actualization’ of identity regulation apparatuses (p. 356). Bardon et al (2012) conclude that researching the role of materiality may highlight the material conditions which enable or constrain individuals becoming. They encourage scholars to explore individuals’ possibilities to shape their becoming through their potential to disidentify with and/or disrupt material constraints and conditions (Bardon et al, 2012). Barad (2007) conceives such possibilities for disruption as being related to “the workings of agency” (p. 178) and, more specifically, the enactment of agential cuts.

Barad (2007) makes clear that agency is “*not something someone or something has*” but is, rather, “*a matter of intra-acting*” and enacting “*iterative changes to particular practices ... through the dynamics of intra-activity*” (p. 178, italics in original). In other words, separate individual (human or nonhuman) agencies do not exist prior to or precede their intra-action with other agencies. This means agentially intra-acting ‘components’ are ontologically inseparable; any description of them as ‘distinct’ agencies is “in a relational, not an absolute, sense, that is, *agencies are only distinct in relation to their mutual entanglement*” (Barad, 2007: 33, italics in original). Within this continuous flow of intra-acting and of unfolding agential activity, embodied selves (ourselves, themselves) and other ‘bodies’ (including materiality, environments, space, knowledge) are therefore co-constituted (Shotter, 2013) in “a dynamic and shifting entanglement of relations” (Barad, 2007: 224) and agencies which enact the im/possibilities of a particular moment. Barad, in an interview with Juelskjær and Schwennesen (2012), explains that the enactment of an agential cut simultaneously entails the entanglement of “what’s on ‘either side’ of the cut since these are produced in one move” (p. 20). Barad uses the expression ‘in/determinacy’ to emphasize the simultaneity of some ‘thing’ being determined and not determined, and of effecting simultaneously what is possible and impossible. Barad (2007) argues the particular im/possibilities enacted by agential cuts entail ethical obligations, as agential cuts “produce determinate boundaries and properties of ‘entities’ within phenomena” (148) and “contribute to the differential mattering of the world” (178). Matter, and what matters, is therefore never a settled matter but we enact momentary settling (Christov-Bakargiev, 2014). For example, as researchers we enact agential cuts “in different ways, at different points in time, with different ends in view, in picking out for attention, and action, different features” (Shotter, 2013: 308) of the phenomena of which we are a part.

Shotter's (2013: 315) interpretation of Barad suggests that "[w]ithin an intra-action, which aspect within an ongoing flow of activity is 'subjective' (i.e. agentially active) at any one time, and which 'objective' (i.e. acted upon), can thus be made determinate in different ways at different moments in time." However, as already discussed in relation to material-discursive apparatuses, "*what kind of context we are in, [and] the 'requirements' our current understandings exert on us to respond within them in appropriate ways*" influence the agential cuts which are enacted (Shotter, 2013: 311, italics in original). Differential cuts enact "constitutive exclusions" (Barad, 2007, p.98) and, therefore, produce bodily differences which matter. Barad (in Juelskjær and Schwennesen, 2012: 21) therefore encourages us to analyze both what 'comes to matter' and what is excluded from mattering, alongside a concern to acknowledge "responsibility for the violence of the cut".

In applying sociomateriality agency theories, including Barad's (2007) work, to identity work, Symon and Pritchard (2014) found that power relations played out in the constitutive entanglement of material and human agencies. Barad (2007) discusses Fernandes' (1997) study of power and identity and its "close attention to ongoing contestations over space, time, and movement in the life of the factory" (p. 228), as part of the ongoing intra-actions of humans and machines, through which identities of, for example, class, gender, religion, and ethnicity were performatively produced. Barad (2007) includes the questions which Fernandes considers: How is difference iteratively produced? What local forms does it take? What differences do differences in production make for the production of different differences? (p. 227). Our interest is in examining how relations of disability are iteratively (re)produced within and through ongoing contests over space, time, and movement in the life of a disabled academic, as materialized within and through workplaces practices. Like Barad's (2007) reading of Fernandes' study and the questions she poses, we are interested in exploring the nature of, and relationship between, material and discursive dimensions of power relations. We propose that paying attention to material-discursive agential cuts enacted as disabled employees intra-act with the mundane materiality of work place practices - such as chairs, box files and office space – and others will enable us to surface the power inherent in the differential boundary-making of 'disabled' and 'non-disabled' people.

Having introduced Barad's key concepts relating to her posthumanist performative account of material-discursive practices, we outline how we fuse these with Bardon et al's (2012) call for exploration of the socio-material actualization of identity regulation apparatuses. The ongoing, dynamic intra-action of human and non-human materiality produce power-infused material-discursive practices – or material-discursive apparatuses of bodily production (Barad, 2007: 230) – within and through which identities are mutually constituted. Different apparatuses, as continuously flowing and complex human-material-space-time entanglements (Barad, 2007), differentially shape identity formation through their "unfolding agential activity" (Barad, 2007) and cuts. Our interest is in exploring how disabled people's identities, and specifically disabled academics' identities, are formed by highlighting the dynamics of human and material intra-activity. We extend Symon and Pritchard's (2011) research, which explored the role of mobile phones in the "complex sociomaterial entanglement of role, person, artefacts, place and time" (p. 8), by focussing attention on mundane material artefacts, such as box files, chairs, and

standing in meetings. To frame our research, we address the following research questions:

How are disabled academics' identities formed within and by the unfolding agential cuts enacted within human-mundane materiality-space-time intra-actions?

What patterns of difference that make a difference emerge for disabled academics and how do the effects of difference matter (Barad, 2007) in terms of their identity formation?

Research design

The data we draw upon for our Baradian reading of disabled people's identity formation are taken from a wider study of eight disabled academics' experiences of career. The second author conducted and digitally recorded semi-structured interviews, lasting between 50-120 minutes, with the three men and five women participants, which generated narratives of their working lives as disabled academics. Significantly, for this paper, participants were not asked directly about the sociomateriality of organizing practices or about their identities as academics. We decided to use the data for the current research because we appreciated the potential for understanding identity in the disabled academics' narratives of intra-acting with people and mundane materiality. The original study's narrative approach fitted with our current interests in identity and material-discursive practices and with the approach taken by Symon and Pritchard (2014). However, we acknowledge that we did not observe the disabled academics as they "participated in enacting matter" (Barad, 2007:178).

For our Baradian reading of disabled academics' identity formation, we developed an analytical framework. Informed by the identity issues raised by Barad (2007) and Bardon et al (2012), we fused Mauthner and Doucet's (1998) voice-centred relational reading method – a method we had both previously used in separate research projects - with key concepts from Barad's (2007) posthumanist performative account and Shotter's (2013) interpretation and application of agential cuts to discursive psychology (see Table 1). Reading 1 – reading for the researcher's intra-acting with the text - highlights the importance of 'understanding the world from within and as part of it' (Barad, 2007: 88) and acknowledges that 'knowing is a material practice of engagement as part of the world in its differential becoming' (p. 89). The reading 'attends to patterns of difference' (Barad, 2007: 29) between the researcher's intra-actions within and as part of the world (Barad, 2007) and the participant's. Reading 2 – reading for the material-discursive apparatuses within which the participant is a part, and for the agential cuts which are enacted - acknowledges that 'subject and object do not pre-exist as such, but emerge through intra-actions' (Barad, 2007: 89) and that agencies (human and material) are enacted through unfolding and cross-cutting agential cuts (Barad, 2007). Reading 3 – reading for identity formation and the patterns of difference that make a difference - acknowledges that 'identity formation is a contingent and contested ongoing material process' (Barad, 2007: 241) and that identities are iteratively reconfigured as part of the (re)configuring of power relations (Barad, 2007). The reading also acknowledges that 'instruments of power' (Barad, 2007: 230) differentially shape identity formation.

Table 1: Baradian-informed readings for material-discursive identity formation: an analytical framework

Reading and its focus	<p>Reading 1 – reading for the researcher’s intra-acting with the text</p> <p>This ‘reader-response’ reading highlights the importance of ‘understanding the world from within and as part of it’ (Barad, 2007: 88). The reading acknowledges that ‘knowing is a material practice of engagement as part of the world in its differential becoming’ (Barad, 2007: 89). The reading ‘attends to patterns of difference’ (Barad, 2007: 29) between the researcher’s experience/intra-actions within and as part of the world and the participant’s.</p>	<p>Reading 2 – reading for the material-discursive apparatuses within which the participant is a part, and for the agential cuts which are enacted.</p> <p>This reading acknowledges that ‘subject and object do not pre-exist as such, but emerge through intra-actions’ (Barad, 2007: 89). It also acknowledges that agencies (human and nonhuman) are enacted through unfolding and cross-cutting agential cuts (Barad, 2007).</p>	<p>Reading 3 – reading for identity formed by specific agential cuts enacted as part of the reconfiguring of power relations, and for the patterns of difference that make a difference.</p> <p>This reading acknowledges that ‘identity formation is a contingent and contested ongoing material process’ (Barad, 2007: 241) and that identities are iteratively reconfigured as part of the (re)configuring of power relations (Barad, 2007). The reading also acknowledges that ‘instruments of power’ (Barad, 2007: 230) differentially shape identity formation.</p>
Questions supporting reading	<p>In the researcher’s reading of the participant’s account of the intra-actions, what are ‘the details and specificities of relations of difference [between the researcher and the participant] and how [do] they matter’? (Barad, 2007: 71).</p> <p>What does the reader ‘notice’ and how can we ‘make use of [such] <i>noticings</i>’ (Shotter, 2013: 321) in relating to the text/context.</p>	<p>With whom (other humans) and what (nonhuman material) is the participant intra-acting? (e.g. what ‘technologies, spatial arrangements, processes, routines and any other material artifacts, regulatory decisions, administrative measures, moral obligations, and local/societal discourses’ (Bardon et al, 2012) are intra-acting?</p> <p>Within the ongoing flow of agential activity, what is the ‘unfolding sequence of particular <i>tryings</i>’ (Shotter, 2013: 311) (i.e. agential cuts)? For example:</p> <p>Which ‘aspect’ (who/what) is ‘subjective’ (i.e. agentially active)</p>	<p>What contests over space, time and movement are played out in the dynamic intra-acting of the participant, others and nonhuman material (Barad, 2007)?</p> <p>What ‘ambiguities and indeterminacies’ Shotter, 2013: 309) (e.g. doubts about practices, meanings etc) are temporarily resolved by the agential cuts? What possibilities of/for change are enacted by the participant, others and the nonhuman material as part of the unfolding reconfiguring of power relations?</p> <p>What ‘requirements’ are exerting on the</p>

		<p>at any given time, and which 'objective' (i.e. acted upon) (Shotter, 2013: 315) and does this change as time unfolds (Shotter, 2013)?</p> <p>What agential cuts are made through the dynamic intra-acting of the participant, others and nonhuman material? For example: In their material-discursive acts (as performative utterances) '<i>What</i> is that person <i>doing</i> in saying that? How are they <i>using</i> that word, in <i>this</i> situation, <i>here</i> and <i>now</i>?' (Shotter, 2013: 320).</p>	<p>participant to respond in 'appropriate' ways (Shotter, 2013: 311)?</p> <p>What assumptions are being made about the particular human/non human material? (e.g. what 'positional actualization' (Bardon et al, 2012) is being enacted? How do these assumptions enable/limit possibilities for action (i.e. ongoing agential cuts)?</p> <p>Which particular agencies are privileged in the boundary-making of the agential cut?</p> <p>In what ways does the individual (attempt to) disidentify with and/or disrupt material constraints and conditions (Bardon et al, 2012)?</p> <p>What 'patterns of difference that make a difference' (Barad, 2007: 72) emerge through these readings?</p> <p>How do the effects of difference matter (Barad, 2007)? In other words, which differences matter? How do they matter? And for whom? For instance, what 'ways of be(hav)ing are less accessible to certain individuals than to others' (Bardon et al, 2012: 361)?</p>
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We use the analytical framework to “critically reflect on ... the seemingly insignificant and all-too-mundane ... realities of everyday organizational life” (Ybema et al., 2015) for one of the original study’s participants, Gina. Gina participated in the original research study having worked in private and public sector organisations before working in two higher education (HE) institutions in the UK. Gina acquired an impairment from a muscular skeletal injury before entering higher education. Whilst Gina stated she didn’t want to discuss her career in specific details (‘I wouldn’t go into too much detail about my career because I think that is difficult because that identifies me too clearly’), she did explain that the post impairment experiences before joining HE were positive, having received a good assessment of her access requirements which were then met. Gina’s first HE employer was also positive in assessing her requirements but they were slow in making the arrangements. Gina’s second HE employment was not as positive, and it is this experience that Gina focused upon in her interview, comparing and contrasting the arrangements made by previous employers to the lack of inclusion or arrangements made in the second HE employment context. We have selected extracts from Gina’s interview text which refer to mundane materiality and practices such as box files, chairs, and standing in meetings. Independently, we made notes about the text based on each of the readings, and then compared and contrasted interpretations which we present below. We give the data extract and the insights we gained from each reading before exploring, in the Discussion section, “the boundary-making practices that distinguish ‘able-bodied’ from ‘disabled’” (Barad, 2007:158).

Contesting practices of sitting down and standing up in meetings

the second higher education institution I worked at really is medieval in its approach, I mean in other institutions I’ve worked at if you stood up in a meeting, because you just couldn’t sit down any longer, no-one would have been impolite enough to say to you ‘why are you doing that?’ or ‘are you fed up?’ or ‘are you going?’ or something, but in the second institution it would immediately be drawn attention to which means of course you try not to do it.

Because I mean the fact that you’ve come in with a special support for your chair or something and you’ve got an extra cushion should have kind of indicated to them that you have some difficulties sitting for long periods of time and you really don’t want to have to carry a banner around with you but I just think that ... It seems to go deep in a way, I think there is a sort of feeling that ‘this is a big concession we are making to let someone like you be here’ that I never felt in the other organisations I have worked for, ever.

you are really faced with a choice in a sense, that in an organisation that operates like that you’ve either got to become, really, a hider of your disability, a conscious hider of it I mean not just carrying on... or you’ve got to become a disability campaigner, it presents you with no other choice.

In attending to patterns of difference between the participant and the researcher, although the first author has been experiencing some mild discomfort in one hip caused by sitting for too long, she noted that she had never stood up in a meeting to ease the pain. Therefore, she has not experienced the negative voiced reactions to which Gina refers. Gina refers to others’ reactions to her standing up as being

‘impolite’, implying discourteous and rude in a deliberate way, and the first author read the responses, and particularly the comment ‘are you fed up?’, as not only discourteous but also negatively judgemental.

The data extract refers to the dynamic intra-acting of spatial arrangements and routines of sitting down (and not standing up) in a meeting. Gina compares and contrasts the practices and people in the second HE institution, described as ‘an organisation that operates like that’, with those in the other institutions where she has worked. Gina’s use of the word ‘should have’, in relation to the ‘special support for your chair and ... extra cushion’ which ‘should have kind of indicated to them that you have some difficulties sitting for long periods of time’, implies a moral obligation on ‘them’ and/or the organisation to understand her needs/requirements as being different. The data extract gives details of the ‘unfolding sequence of particular tryings’ (Shotter, 2013: 311), that is agential cuts. For example, an agential cut is made by others in saying ‘why are you doing that?’, implying that the ‘doing that’ is not appropriate. This is followed by an agential cut being made by Gina in using the word ‘impolite’ to indicate that an expectancy that others would not be rude in asking what she is doing has been violated. The agential cut made by others in ‘immediately ... draw[ing] attention’ to her standing up closes down the possibility of such a change in routine because the effect of the others’ cut ‘means of course you try not to do it’. In other words, the others’ agential cut cross-cuts any that Gina may attempt to make. Gina hoped that the ‘special support for your chair or something and ... an extra cushion’ might have made an agential cut in delineating Gina as having particular personal circumstances. However, Gina’s use of the word ‘should have’ suggests that ambiguities about her ‘difficulties sitting for long periods of time’ are not resolved by the chair or cushion, causing Gina to ‘hav[e] to carry a (metaphorical) banner around with you’. In other words, we interpret Gina’s agential cut as trying to make deeper the cut, which she considered as an obvious indication, enacted by the chair and cushion. Others make an agential cut in creating ‘a sort of feeling that “this is a big concession we are making to let someone like you be here”’. The expression ‘like you’ makes a further agential cut in delineating Gina because it implies that Gina is not like ‘us’. The cut seems to have been reiteratively made such that ‘it seems to go deep’. The effect of the unfolding, cross-cutting agential cuts is to present Gina with a limited choice of how she responds ‘in an organisation that operates like that’, with its ‘medieval ... approach’ and ‘impolite’ others. Either she becomes ‘a conscious hider of it [your disability]’ or ‘a disability campaigner’. The final statement ‘it presents you with no other choice’ conveys how she has been ‘acted upon’ (Shotter, 2013) and constructs differences that matter.

The differences that are materialized within and through the specific agential cuts that are enacted and the reconfiguring of power relations relate to: moving the body in a meeting – standing rather than sitting; others being ‘impolite enough’ to draw attention to her standing up in a meeting; having a special support for a chair and an extra cushion, indicating difficulties in sitting for long periods of time; being made to feel as if a ‘big concession’ is being made about letting ‘someone like you be here’; in having limited choice about the ways of responding to the ambiguities and indeterminacies which remain unresolved. The effects of these differences matter in constructing Gina as different: as ‘you’/not ‘us’; as someone who draws attention to self through a different bodily practice or who tries not to enact the different bodily practice so as not to have attention drawn to her; through her ‘special support for

your chair' and; in the way in which she is made to feel through the 'big concession we [others] are making'. Her ability to respond - response-ability (Barad, 2012: 81, in interview with Kleinman) is limited and constructs one of two undesirable identity formations – as 'a hider of your disability' or as 'a disability campaigner'.

Contesting what are/are not ergo dynamically sound workstations

... employers can be quite proud of their workstations and if they've got what they think is an ergo dynamically sound workstation, they're not very happy for you to say 'well actually I can't work at this' unless they've really got a clear understanding about the individuality of people's problems and they're willing to hear 'well it's a lovely workstation I admire it enormously, the décor is beautiful but actually I can't work at it' and that's quite hard sometimes for them to hear, especially if it's new, they seem to have great tolerance for you complaining about old desks but if it happens to be new ... I mean that happened to me in the second higher education institution, that they'd actually recently replaced the desks and they were very proud of them and they were a shape that they thought was brilliant which is absolutely the worst possible shape and means the chair I have to use can't actually get close enough to the desk because of the round shape (of the desk) for me to ... oh it's just a nightmare, but they didn't seem to want to accept that. I had people arguing with me that I didn't need what I said I needed because this had been ... they had been told this was ergo dynamically sound and me saying ergo dynamics is about the relationship of the individual with the piece of equipment and you feel like, never mind my day job I'll just do disability training

In attending to patterns of difference and similarity between the researchers and the participant, the first author noted that, even though she had done mandatory visual display unit use training on an annual basis, she did not know how to define an ergo dynamically sound workstation. However, recently she had had a chair assessment and now appreciated the relationship of a chair, desk and person's posture for good spine alignment. On returning to work after the assessment, she noticed that her desk has a curve, and that her chair has arms which prevent an appropriate positioning of chair, desk and body. Rather than a pattern of difference, the second author noticed the similarities with her own experiences of negotiating suitable office equipment. She noticed, and appreciated from experience, the difficulties that 'ergonomically designed' furniture can pose when it is assumed to meet the needs of all. She also noticed the emphasis Gina placed on Others' 'clear understanding about the individuality of people's problems' and the extent to which 'they're willing to hear' or not hear and act on the basis of 'people's problems'. She noticed too Gina's use of 'nightmare' which indicates the strength of emotion felt in this intra-action and its related power relations.

The agential cuts that are enacted emerge through the intra-actions of Gina with others and the employer's workstations in the second Higher Education Institution. Others include: 'they' (employers) who think their workstations are ergo dynamically sound; they who have and, through the agential cutting together-apart (Barad, in interview with Juelskjær and Schwennesen, 2012), they who do not have a clear

understanding about the individuality of people's problems; they who are willing to hear; they who 'didn't seem to want to accept that'; and 'people' who were arguing with Gina. Agential cuts relating to the employer's workstation delineate it as: 'lovely'; having decor which is 'beautiful'; contrasting new and old desks; describing the 'round shape' of the desks which 'they' think is 'brilliant' but which is 'absolutely the worst possible shape' for Gina. In other words, the agential cut of the shape of the desks in making 'them' think they are 'brilliant' produces quite a different meaning for Gina. Overall, the context and 'apparatus of bodily production' are presented as less permissive towards alternative needs and practices, for instance in having the chair close to the desk, because the workstation is new. The agency of the 'round shape of the desk' which is 'lovely' and understood by 'they' as an ergo dynamically sound workstation is privileged over an alternative desk which will allow 'the chair I have to use ... [to] get close enough to the desk' and over Gina's knowledge of what an ergo dynamically sound workstation is, compared with what 'they had been told'. The dynamically unfolding agential 'movements' denote the contests over materiality, technology, spatial arrangements and discourses of what ergo dynamically sound means – the round shape of the desk invites, accommodates and refuses particular types of chair. Gina refutes the workstation's properties as suitable for her embodied and impairment related requirements and attempts to deny the Others' privileging of the workstation desk's agency by offering an alternative interpretation of ergo dynamically sound design: 'and me saying ergo dynamics is about the relationship of the individual with the piece of equipment'.

The agential cuts are attempts to resolve temporarily the 'ambiguities and indeterminacies' (Shotter, 2013: 309) about what is an ergo dynamically sound workstation and in accepting Gina's individual needs, by having 'a clear understanding about the individuality of people's problems and [a] willing[ness] to hear'. There is a suggestion that the indeterminacy about what is an ergo dynamically sound workstation is resolved but only at the expense of Gina giving up 'my day job' to become a 'disability trainer'. The indeterminacy about whether they will accept that Gina needs an alternative workstation seems unresolved. As well as being forced into a position as a 'disability trainer', limiting her response-ability to her 'day job', the context regulates Gina in that she is not able to work at the workstation – 'I can't work at this/it' is repeated - and her needs (rights) are not accepted by others. Gina attempts to disidentify with and/or disrupt the material constraints and conditions (Bardon et al, 2012) by stating that she cannot work at the workstation, by trying to make them 'hear' (repeated), by using language with strong performative effect in describing the situation as a 'nightmare', and by complaining. The patterns of difference – in not agreeing on what is an ergo dynamically sound workstation, and in not negotiating acceptance of Gina's individual needs - matter because Gina is subjected to the violence of the cross-cutting and reinforcing agential cuts (Barad in interview with Juelskjær and Schwennesen, 2012: 19) in not being able to work at the workstation, in not being heard or understood with regards to her needs and in causing her to have to complain, in subjecting her to a 'nightmare' situation and in not having her situation accepted, and in positioning her in an undesired role as a disability trainer rather than academic. For Gina, the identity which is iteratively formed as part of the ongoing contested materiality and is differentially shaped as part of the reconfiguring of power relations (Barad, 2007) is as someone who is not able. The materiality of the apparatus - both in terms of the workstation and the broader intra-acting of others, materiality and spatial arrangements within the Higher

Education Institution - constitutes Gina as not able to use the workstation, not able to work and, therefore, not able to be a functioning academic.

Contesting filing practices

I have always hoped that disability could be a positive influence, I really struggle to, I can't carry heavy weights like the kettle full of water or a big box file and I'm happy to say that in organisations I have worked for before that has been a good influence on filing because it isn't good for anybody to carry big box files about so people have looked at how they manage filing and they have used the fact that I'm there as a way of addressing it for everybody. Here, it was seen as 'well then you can have three or four ring binders instead if you like, but that is really difficult for everybody else, but everything else has to stay in these box files and you'll just have to ask for somebody to lift them down' and those kind of things make you feel very different and I don't think I felt different at any other institution apart from the second higher education institution that I worked at.

The first author's starting point in understanding disability is not to regard it as a positive influence for change for all. However she can appreciate Gina's point that a change in practice which reduces the need to carry heavy weights would be positive. For instance, she has noticed how some colleagues used pull-along trolleys for carrying/moving marking assignments. This practice has become common within her higher education institution with the assessment team issuing assignments to academic staff using similar trolleys.

In the dynamic intra-acting of Gina, others in the second higher education institution (who are referred either passively or impersonally by the phrases 'Here, it was seen as ...', 'everybody else' implying except Gina, and a non-specified 'somebody') and the materiality of filing practices, contests are played out over the movement of big and heavy weight box files, and alternatively asked for but not universally accepted ring binders. Possibilities for change to filing practices have been enacted 'in organisations I have worked for before' through agential cuts made by Gina's disability as a 'positive' and 'good' influence on filing 'because it isn't good for anybody to carry big box files about so people have looked at how they manage filing and they have used the fact that I'm there as a way of addressing it for everybody'. In contrast, 'here', in 'the second higher education institution', the agential cut enacted by Gina's disability has not had a positive effect. The 'requirement' (Shotter, 2013: 311) that 'everything else has to stay in these box files' limits Gina's possibilities for action because she 'can't carry heavy weights like ... a big box file'. The current filing practice and its material artifacts in the form of box files are privileged over the agencies of alternative practice and materiality, in the form of ring binders, because the agential cut of 'that' [change in practice] is 'seen' as 'really difficult for everybody else'. The effect of the discursive agential cut repetition of 'else', used to denote all other materiality that 'has to stay in these box files', and all other people apart from Gina, produces Gina as 'very different'. The requirement that she will 'just have to ask for somebody to lift them [the box files] down' further produces 'patterns of difference that make a difference' (Barad, 2007: 72) because the filing practices continue to be less accessible to Gina than to others.

Discussion

Our aims in this paper have been, first, to bring materiality to the fore of understanding identity formation by acknowledging materiality as an “agentive and productive factor in its own right” (Barad, 2007: 225) and by “incorporat[ing] material constraints and conditions and the material dimension of agency” (Barad, 2007: 225) into identity theorizing. Second, we aimed to extend the work of Symon and Pritchard in exploring the implications of the entangling of material and human agencies for identity formation, in our case through the theory of agential cuts (Barad, 2007; Shotter, 2013) by exploring the power effects of material-discursive apparatuses for disabled academics (and disabled people more generally). Through “critically reflect[ing] on ... the seemingly insignificant and all-too-mundane ... realities of everyday organizational life” for disabled people, we have attempted to “see familiar landscapes with new eyes” (Ybema et al., 2015). Thus, we have extended theorizing about the intra-action of human and material agencies and, specifically, about boundary-making agential cuts, enabling us to say something about the regulatory effects of matter that matters (Barad, 2007) for the identity formation of disabled people.

The Baradian reading we have developed in this paper enabled us to appreciate that for people with bodily variations (designated impairments) intra-acting with and as part of the world is constrained by mundane materiality (sitting/standing, desks, chairs, lever arch files etc). Contests over mundane materiality, movement and space, and the unfolding agential cuts which are enacted iteratively reproduce the material-discursive apparatus and power effects and, therefore, produce particular identities for disabled academics. Agential cuts enacted in a specific context reproduce agential cuts enacted previously, for instance within and through the commissioning and designing of mundane materiality, for example as seen in the ‘technologies’ of ergo dynamically sound workstations, and reinforce the material-discursive apparatus and power effects of normative understandings of the body, that is the material-discursive practices and discourse of ableism, and the im/possibility of ‘differential material embodiment’ (Barad, 2007: 155). As Barad (2007:154) states, ‘the particular configuration of the apparatus and its corresponding embodiment of particular concepts to the exclusion of others’ may be disrupted by cuts which challenge the ‘presumed givenness of bodily boundaries’. However, for Gina in the context of the second Higher Education Institution, the im/possibilities of cross-cutting the material-discursive practices of ableism are frustrated because the cumulative effect of the agential cuts, in Gina’s words, ‘seems to go deep’. In spite of Gina’s ‘tryings’ (Shotter, 2013: 311) to enact the im/possibility of ‘differential material embodiment’ (155), agential cuts producing normative understandings of the body are given priority in the ongoing contested material process and practices (Barad, 2007) and produce differences that matter for disabled academics’ identity formation.

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